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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASMARA 000019

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SUBJECT: ERITREAN REPATRIATIONS AND IDP RESETTLEMENT

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4 (d)

11. (C) Summary: Eritrea ICRC Head of Delegation Catherine Deman (strictly protect) told the ambassador January 4 that her organization in the past twelve months has assisted in reducing the number of Eritrean internally displaced persons (IDP) from 30,000 to 5,000 and that in December around 400 Ethiopian residents of Eritrea were repatriated to their homeland, while just 15 Eritreans chose to be repatriated from Ethiopia to Eritrea. End Summary.

12. (C) IDPs Mostly Resettled

Deman said that a year ago some 30,000 Eritreans remained displaced from the 1998-2000 border war, down from over a million just after the war. Of the 25,000 settled in 2007, four out of five were settled in the western lowland region of Gash Barka. Today only 5,000 IDPs remain, almost all in the south-central part of the country.

13. (C) The Final 5,000

The remaining 5,000 IDPs are people whose land is now occupied by Ethiopian troops, Deman explained. They get food assistance from the Ministry of Labor and Human Welfare, along with non-food support from ICRC. 4,000 IDPs currently encamped near the south-central town of Senafe will be resettled on land identified in the area, although 1,000 individuals near Tsorena are slated to be resettled in the south-western Gash Barka region. Most of the 1,000 are resisting resettlement; they are Tigrinya-speaking highland farmers who don't want to move to a lowlands region dominated by people of different ethnic groups. The government is reportedly threatening to reduce their food support if they continue to resist resettlement to Gash Barka.

14. (C) Stolen Food as a Resettlement Draw

WFP Country Director Rahman Chowdury (also protect) updated the ambassador January 3 on the disposition of the \$36 million worth of grain and other commodities seized without compensation in 2006 by Eritrean authorities from WFP, USAID, and other donor stockpiles. The WFP representative said the government of Eritrea sold some of the commodities on the

open market and distributed other portions to clinics and IDP camps. (Note: He said WFP is likely to close its Eritrea program in June due to the commodity theft.) ICRC's Deman said that in 2007 the GSE halted food supplies to IDP camps for three months, then promised substantial food rations if the IDPs would participate in resettlement programs in Gash Barka. 20,000 hungry IDPs reportedly took up the offer and were rewarded with stolen WFP and USAID food.

15. (C) Mereb Bridge Repatriations

ICRC continues to conduct repatriation operations enabling Ethiopians and Eritreans living in the other country to move home. Every two or three months ICRC sends a bus and truck convoy from Asmara, down through Mendefera, to the bridge over the Mereb River near the Ethiopian village of Rama. In October some 800 Ethiopian residents of Eritrea, perhaps spooked by war tensions, asked for ICRC repatriation assistance. In mid-December another 400 chose to depart. The buses from Asmara stop on the Eritrean end of the bridge, the passengers walk across, and board buses organized by the ICRC's Ethiopian office waiting on the other side. The baggage trucks back onto the bridge tail to tail and transfer luggage directly. In December most of the 15 people returning to Eritrea from Ethiopia were elderly people going home "to die." The small group also included some young shepherds who unwittingly crossed into Ethiopia while chasing runaway goats, Deman explained. She estimated that some 15,000 Ethiopian citizens are legal residents of Eritrea.

16. (C) POWs and Former POWs

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Deman believes the two Ethiopian soldiers captured in the December 26 firefight near Tsorena are being held at a POW camp near Afabet in the north-central highlands. She said 30 Ethiopian POWs captured during the border war refused to be returned to Ethiopia in the post-war prisoner exchange, adding that most of the 30 were Oromos or other ethnic minorities who had deserted or "done other bad things." ICRC has resettled 27 of the 30 to Canada, Australia, and European countries and is processing resettlement options for two of the final three.

MCMULLEN